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## Individualidade e deficiência: “Criatividade Compulsiva” na Comunidade Digital Global

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**RESUMO — Individualidade e deficiência: “Criatividade Compulsiva” na Comunidade Digital Global** — O surgimento do capital digital deu origem ao “capitalismo criacionista,” a partir do qual a economia criativa transformou as relações entre identidade, propriedade social, individualidade, trabalho e valor (DAVIS & BOELLSTROFF, 2016, p. 2107). De acordo com um conjunto substancial de informações, esses produtores criativos são predominantemente masculinos, brancos, heterossexuais e saudáveis. No entanto, a pesquisa de Davis e Boellstroff no Second Life (SL), uma plataforma global digital que oferece seus espetáculos mais inovadores à comunidade deficiente, demonstrou que homens e mulheres com deficiência e “compulsivamente criativos” encontram no SL uma oportunidade para se envolver na economia criativa quando o emprego na vida real não é uma realidade. Este artigo explora os efeitos globais do SL na vida de pessoas com deficiências que passaram vários anos interagindo com avatares em comunidades virtuais que congregam pessoas com deficiências. Usarei uma lente crítica de estudos sobre deficiência que define a deficiência não apenas como um fenômeno social, mas também como uma realidade incorporada. Isto incluiria o meu corpo como uma entidade social em termos de posição e orientação no mundo, e como o “corpo político”, que significa os efeitos das estruturas institucionais que controlam, regulam e excluem corpos deficientes (MAYBEE, 2017). Portanto, o corpo do avatar em um espaço virtual será o principal local de exploração.

### **PALAVRAS CHAVE**

Second life. Deficiência. Arte. Lugar. Identidade.

### **ABSTRACT — Selfhood and Disability: Compulsive Creativity in the Global Digital Community**

— The emergence of digital capital has given birth to “creationist capitalism” in which the creative economy has transformed the relationships between identity, social-belonging, selfhood, labor, and value (Davis & Boellstroff, 2016, p. 2107). According to a substantial body of research, these creative producers are predominantly male, white, heterosexual, and able-bodied. Yet, Davis’s and Boellstroff’s research in Second Life (SL), a rich, digital, global platform that is largely indebted to the disability community for its most innovative spectacles, has shown that “compulsively creative” men and women with disabilities throughout the world have found SL to be an opportunity to engage in the creative economy when employment in real life is not available. This article explores the global effects of SL in the lives of people with disabilities who spent several years meeting avatars in virtual disability communities. I will use a critical disability studies lens that defines disability not only as a social phenomenon but also as an embodied reality. This would include the body as self, a social entity in terms of position and orientation in the world, and as the “body politic,” which signifies the effects from institutional structures that control, regulate and exclude impaired bodies (Maybee, 2017). Therefore, the avatar body in a virtual place will be the primary site of exploration.

### **KEYWORDS**

Second Life. Disability. Art. Place. Identity.

*Investigating these issues also involves thinking about how the disabled or deaf subject is constructed in and through research itself (CARR, 2010, p. 12).*

In May 2018, the feature length film, *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me* was released with full access on Youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQw02-me0W4&feature=youtu.be>). Filmmaker Bernhard Drax (Draxtor) worked with researchers Tom Boellstorff (University of California, Irvine) and Donna Davis (University of Oregon) in Second Life (SL). The two digital ethnographers were inspired by the diversity and resourcefulness of people with disabilities in SL who lived in a community on Virtual Ability Island. The three-year National Science Foundation–funded project titled *Virtual Worlds, Disability, and New Cultures of the Embodied Self* “studied the various ways disabled persons’ experience embodiment and place in virtual worlds” (KRUEGER, 2018, p. 1).

The residents of SL live in many countries around the world, which is mainly the reason for its diversity. The fact that Bernhard Drax was able to meet geographically and culturally diverse people on his computer was essential. In an interview, Drax (2018) suggested that the habitats they created themselves, “the space that represents them,” also afforded the researcher even greater insight. Sitting in one’s virtual home, on a porch by a pond, or a back yard, would not happen unless the researcher had the money to fly around the world. “You get geographic diversity without leaving your home” (p. 25). In this article, I introduce this collaborative film by beginning with a brief background of the new discipline of virtual ethnography,<sup>1</sup> specifically, with disabled people and the innovative built environments in SL that have become home for this substantial population.

It is true that SL affords opportunities for people with disabilities not accessible in real life. However, I argue that the experience in SL is far more complex, particularly when the notion of art and creativity is the most compelling reason for disabled

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnography in cultural studies has been liberated from the “colonialist” methodologies of classic anthropology in its disruption of pre-meditated outcomes in favor of more collaborative studies between the “participant observer” and the “subject.” The sense of frontier-like spontaneity, surprise, mystery, and ambiguity in virtual realities have invited considerations of ethics in the unequal positionalities in research methodologies by employing collaborative and transparent methods. Boellstorff (2008) calls participant observation “intentionally oxymoronic; you cannot fully participate and fully observe at the same time, but it is in this paradox that ethnographers conduct their best work” (p. 71). While there is much progress, researchers are nevertheless predominantly white academics probing the otherness of their subjects. Indigenous and disabled people, tired of being spoken for and about, are turning the tables as researchers and academics of their own cultures (see Linda T. Smith, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2016).

residents to enter the virtual world. For example, the varied experiences of being in SL might include the inhabitation of more than one avatar, which many choose to do, as a way of representing many aspects of the self. Conversely, Hickey-Moody and Wood (2008) describe an instance when one person, a day care worker, became the voice, hands, and identity for nine severely disabled adults, suggesting the possibility of multiple subjectivities within one individual “in a post-structural theoretical climate that has embraced the death of the (singular) subject” (p. 3).

Attitudes ranging from ambivalent to harshly negative about SL and similar virtual worlds continue to affect the notion of its value (see the avatar Shyla Gecko’s response to such attitudes below). My use of SL with undergraduate art education students in a Disability Studies course, and graduates in a Research course was surprisingly similar. I encountered fierce resistance, which Boellstorff tells me is quite common (T. Boellstorff, personal communication, July, 2018). It was not mild disinterest that my students felt, but rather intense aversion. The several negative comments about *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me* on youtube suggest that many conscious/unconscious feelings originate from polarizing the virtual and real worlds when, in fact, they have porous boundaries. Another reason might be more complex. Many assume that SL is populated by marginalized subcultures. People with disabilities in SL appear to some observers as escapists and denialists, living a dream of ability. Both possibilities are, I think, unconsciously patronizing. Many of the avatars, who we are able to glimpse in real life (RL) in the film, comment on such judgments and offer in-depth opposition. I was met with similar disdain from colleagues. A typical attitude was “I’m having enough trouble with my first life,” and another, “Oh, no one does that anymore.” Thus, I sensed academic elitism from colleagues and a lack of academic curiosity from students. *Our Digital Selves* reawakened my enthusiasm for the virtual world and virtual ethnography, complex spaces that provoke strong emotions.

## **The Birth of Virtual Ethnography**

If ethnography is the study of culture, defined in 1871 by a founding figure in anthropology Edward B. Tylor, then SL must be contained in his definition of culture as “that complex whole which included knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and

any other *capabilities and habits* acquired by man [sic] as a member of society” (Tylor, as cited in BOELLSTORFF, 2008, p. 66, italics mine). According to this definition, says Boellstorff (2008), SL is a complex culture of capabilities and habits rather than the former. What virtual ethnographers have found is the positive side-effect of immersion in virtual culture. Virtual ethnography destabilizes the researcher-as expert and blurs the boundary between the researcher and the researched. The researcher, new to SL and learning to negotiate the terrain and perhaps build, often becomes the student of the “informant.” These shifting positions reexamine the conceptual framework of research methodologies in the construction of difference, discourse, and issues of subjectivity, identity, power, and reflexivity.

Such was the nature of my own research with Mary Stokrocki on Virtual Ability Island in 2012. We brought only our research question with us, otherwise “interviews” were engaging conversations that reciprocally revealed our lives. The laboratory effect of research disappears when the researcher is invited into the avatars’ constructed homes and galleries. They have been generous guides who have spent hours teaching me how to build in SL and refine my appearance with clothes and body transformations. Thus, roles were fluid as the avatars were clearly skilled in building and designing, and enthusiastic about showing the trade to newcomers cum researchers. One of the most engaging and intimate experiences in SL was with Jadyn Firehawk, a former professor and a prolific photographer/sculptor who appeared in *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me*. I experienced the sensory experience of SL, which is the often suspect feeling of total (social) immersion,<sup>2</sup> while sitting across from Jadyn in her gallery. In other words, my real self and avatar self merged in the deepening conversation about our destabilized lives as professors overwhelmed by the pressures of academia. The avatars featured in the film exhibit such intimacies in their virtual and real life relationships, as the camera flips back and forth from avatar to human behind the avatar, which I explore soon.

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<sup>2</sup> The sensory is often considered unattainable in a virtual world, and is instead thought a world that exists as metaphor alone. This is not exactly true, yet Boestroff (2008) warns of the illusion of simulated reality fallacy, or “sensory immersion,” and argues that “virtuality” refers to sociality, not the senses” (p. 113).

Like Boellstorff's first encounter with SL, I used text almost exclusively for several reasons. My SL guide, ISkye Silverweb, is Deaf and I was accustomed to the uses and benefits of text. Text afforded me and my students written documentation of our discussions, while voice seemed ephemeral (although it can be recorded). However, the swiftness of typing by multiple avatars communicating simultaneously, confused students. The discussions with disabled artists that ISkye graciously arranged in her cottage would often be lost to them. The first time I used voice was during an interview with Boellstorff in July 2018 on Ethnographia Island. Voice made the interview startlingly "real," and I noted how "real" really is a relative term in SL, which disturbed my sense of embodied self. Focused engagement with an avatar in SL might be more intensely felt because of the simultaneous social immersion paired with the "unknowingness" and potentiality of the platform.

## Disability Studies in Virtual Worlds

*Disability and difference are empirical examples of the fact that people are not born the same, we are not 'equal.' Rather, we are different. (HICKEY-MOODY & WOOD, 2008, p. 8)*

The context-specific notion of disability advocated in disability studies is fitting and relevant to SL because of the intimacy afforded by virtual place and community discussed above.

The subject of SL as an adjunct rather than an escape or alternative to life is a constant theme in *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me*. Unlike non-disabled assumptions that SL provides *opportunities to "cope"*<sup>3</sup> with disabilities (see STEWART, HANSEN, & CAREY, 2010),<sup>4</sup> I advocate for alternative descriptions such as a space for *varied kinds of engagement*, used by Anna Hickey-Moody and Denise Wood (2008) in their study of disability in SL. The term "varied" is essential, since there is no single way that people who identify as disabled in SL construct their avatars. Certainly, flying,

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<sup>3</sup> "coping with a disability" is a key word in the authors' article "Opportunities for People with Disabilities in the Virtual World of Second Life"

<sup>4</sup> One of the co-authors, Timothy Carey, has Duchenne muscular dystrophy. (DMD), although he is not part of the academic nursing team.

dancing, and sports are possible, but not always sought after. For example, avatars who in real life use a wheelchair may choose to use a wheelchair in SL. The assumption that SL is escapism for people who are physically limited in real life perpetuates the notion that “disability is something one would categorically wish to be without, reduce[ing] their own capacity to act” (p. 12). Stewart et al open their article with this assumption: “In the digital world of Second Life (SL), people with disabilities have a chance to experience life beyond the limitations of their disabilities” (p. 254). As in Stewart et al, many discussions about disability in SL point to the ease with which people with a variety of disabilities might enjoy participating and contributing to events that would not be possible in real life. While there is obvious merit to this perspective, Diane Carr (2010) warns that digital ethnography must adopt the kind of scrutiny that disability studies has allowed this conversation; for instance, the inadvertent propagation of an “impairment as problem/technology as solution” dynamic. “Such patterns implicitly define disability as a property of potentially marginalized individuals who are in need of special support” (para. 6).<sup>5</sup> Yet Davis and Boellstorff (2016) also point out that the non-disabled observer cannot reject such claims as “my disability disappears in SL.” Rather than a denial of the embodied self, “it is a statement about the multiple implications of moving between the online and offline” (p. 2105).

Although Hickey-Moody and Wood write in 2008, before current advances in technology for disabilities, many of their concerns about unequal advantage in accessing technology still exist. They exist not only because of technological limitations, but also because of the lack of will to surmount such limitations, attitudes in real life that are inevitably carried into the SL community. The 2006 United Nations Global Audit of Web Accessibility reported that there was “a global failure to provide the most basic level of web accessibility for people with disabilities” (as cited in HICKEY-MOODY & WOOD, 2008, p. 5).

Thus, SL is an entangled environment in which to study and live disability, even with its apparent attractiveness for disabled residents who have been pioneers and

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<sup>5</sup> Goggin and Newell have warned that research on disability and ICT is ‘replicating charity, medical and other oppressive discourses of disability’ as a result of a failure to engage with Disability Studies (2006, p 310). (p. 8)

made the most exciting innovations in SL (BOELLSTORFF, in *Our Digital Selves*, 2018).<sup>6</sup> Films such as *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me* and the earlier *Login2Life* produced by Daniel Moshel, raise awareness of unresolved problems, which the filmmakers discuss with Linden Lab administrators. However, rather than a disability rights approach to address such inequalities, Hickey-Moody and Wood take a Deleuzian approach, which is foundational to upholding human difference. “This difference must be celebrated and, indeed, revered, as it is the foundation of life itself.... Change and difference, or differentiation, is the ground upon which humans come to be and come to know themselves and others. As such it is the heart of all things” (Deleuze, as cited in HICKEY-MOODY & WOOD, 2008, p. 6). Like Boellstorff, Deleuze rejects the notion of the individualized body, arguing that bodies are mediated through their connections with the world. The Deleuzian preference for potential of the unknown is a daily experience in SL. As such, difference is a more readily celebrated human condition, although not immune to the indifference or rejection of the real world.

In the following section I present the film based on Boellstorff and Davis’s research with disabled artists and builders on Virtual Ability Island. The primary voice is given to these avatars with passionate and engaging narration by the non-disabled filmmaker and researchers. The film destabilizes such binaries as reality versus virtuality and the local versus the global. SL is everywhere and it is nowhere, a profoundly transnational platform with avatars arriving from around the globe. Placemaking and the disability identity are featured in the film, which make possible social immersion and an unusual art form.

### **Compulsive Creativity: *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me***

*Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me* is a miraculous affirmation of Boellstorff and Davis’ research with the enthusiastic filmmaker Bernhard Drax. The film made visual the many years that Boellstorff and Davis spent in Second Life. Boellstorff’s (2008) seminal book *Coming of Age in Second Life* barely mentioned disability, an omission he wanted to revisit, particularly during his second visit to Second Life with Davis where

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<sup>6</sup> Shyla, reported in *Our Digital Selves* that disabled people represent 70 percent of residents in SL.

he “ran into many people with disabilities who were doing interesting things (as cited in KRUEGER, 2018, p. 7).

In a previous study of two avatars with Parkinsons disease (PD) in real life, Dana Davis and Tom Boellstorff (2016)<sup>7</sup> borrow the term *compulsive creativity* from Pierre Bourdieu, a form of cultural capital—in this instance online cultural capital. Compulsive creativity defined here is neither a side effect of a disability<sup>8</sup> nor of medication, as it is so often framed by the ableist perspective of the medical industrial complex. The notion that people who acquire PD later in life suddenly experience a burst of creativity is generalized by the authors to describe people with diverse disabilities. SL, they observed, sets up the conditions for such creativity by its collective construction. Many of the residents, mostly disabled, fit into the category of compulsive creativity through their imagining, planning, and building virtual structures for personal enjoyment, economic interests, or both. They note that the compulsive but benign and even therapeutic nature of creativity was often a continuation of professional pre-disabled lives for many of the avatars. Several avatars are disability activists and therefore compelled by the importance of their mission, such as Shyla and Kath McGill. The building tools of SL offered them the same creativity in new media. The “technological affordances” of SL challenged them to learn the skills required to work with the new medium of textures, templates, and prims. Importantly, “compulsive creativity here partakes in a broader pattern in which the physical and virtual are distinct but linked; in most cases, the latter is neither a substitute for, nor an evasion of, the former” (DAVIS & BOELLSTORFF, 2016, p. 2105). The authors customize the notion of affordances, developed by Gibson (1977), as “objective features in contingent combinations” existing “relative to the properties of some *other* perceiving and acting entity” (KEANE, 2014, p. 7). Thus, they examine how the emergent affordances of the platform-specific virtual world of SL and the specific disability of the avatar made “real” compulsive creativity. Another interesting observation by Davis and Boellstorff (2016)

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<sup>7</sup> Compulsive creativity was first used by an avatar called DB, an architect with PD. Dana Davis and Tom Boellstorff explain that his invention of this term suggested that he was aware of medical terminology that describe compulsive behaviors among people with PD.

<sup>8</sup> In Davis and Boellstorff's (2016) article, “Compulsive Creativity: Virtual Worlds, Disability, and Digital Capital,” they specifically refer to Parkinson's disease.



regarding compulsive creativity is about the heightened awareness of the body and mind that toggles back and forth between virtual and actual made legible by the the virtual as distinct yet connected to the physical.

Most of the avatars in *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me*, who have a variety of disabilities in RL, exhibited forms of compulsive building, designing and art making. Drax expertly weaves together the multiple realities of virtual, actual, identity, and place in a refreshing kind of sense-making of Second Life. The film opens without introduction with Shyla the Super Gecko, a powerful protagonist, in her real home built in 1880, place unknown, as the only context for her narration.

I think that's another thing about being disabled—people are like, “just hold your chin up,” or “be strong.” I’m like, OK, well you come sit in my chair and you be strong and you hold your chin up.

We zoom into Shyla’s living room where she is sitting in a suspended chair in front of the computer tuned into SL. She adds that it took a long time for her because she’s “pretty disabled.”

You know, don’t set up Olympian expectations of my emotional and mental abilities to deal with my life day to day. I mean, this is the other part. I’ve had to re-interpret what other people say. They’re not saying it to be degrading or condescending or anything. They really wish they could fix my situation.

Shyla is a poet and her poems become the moral compass of the film.

You get we all have blood  
We all feel  
We all matter  
We’re all different  
There isn’t a model, there’s no book  
There’s not even answers  
Just one day at a time  
One experience at a time  
One moment at a time  
And the we decide what to do  
In that moment for good or bad  
Better or worse  
Right or wrong  
(and sometimes it is so wrong and we can’t take it back)

With Shyla, Drax sets the tone of the film. These statements encapsulate the inquiry made possible by disability studies and the voice of the disabled person. He explains how he has remained in the background and left the field to the researchers and protagonists. A few opening remarks by Boellstorff describe the parameters of the research as “looking at the experience of disability in SL with an interest in embodiment, but not limited to it.” And later, he presents an important insight about SL that he returns to. “What I want to stress is that embodiment is always *inplacement*. Without place there is no avatar. An avatar without a place is not an avatar, it’s a screen shot.” Persistence of place permits sustained relationships in SL.

Jadyn Firehawk lost her career as a geography professor to bi-polar disorder. She “crashed and burned under the demands of a major research institution.” Frustrated with what is called an “invisible disability” in real life, she made a “brain sling” in SL to give credibility to her disability. “You know when someone wears a sling on their arm no one asks them to lift a heavy object.” Her more compulsive creativity is found in the replicas of worlds in real life, such as Yosemite National Park, a meaningful childhood place. “There’s a word in the geography field called topophilia, which means love of place. Everyone has a place muse, a place where you feel a sense of peace.”

ISkye Silverweb does not use voice, she is a “text enabler,” but she chose to use voice in the film. Her SL build on Etnographia Island expresses her memory as Deaf growing up in a hearing family (see Figure 1). Her constructed memories are re-enactments of participating in family through thought bubbles. “They are absolutely flabbergasted to find out I have quite the vocabulary.” The invisible/visible split, says Boellstorff, “doesn’t go away [in SL], it just shifts.” ISkye has been upfront about her deafness since entering SL. “I am in a foreign country in real life, I am not in SL because I can communicate there.”

Daisy Gator says she is happy to say that she is a dwarf because before SL she didn't have the choice of disclosing or not disclosing. Daisy Gator's home is an example of the merging of one's actual and virtual lives. The camera closes in on the many photographs of Daisy with her family from infancy to the present. In RL and in SL she is a science fiction and fantasy writer and an associate member of SFWA (Science Fiction Writers of America). Drax teleports us to a constructed set in which disabled people are stranded in space (see Figure 2). Drax asks what is clearly a researcher question: "what are your thoughts on the media and disability?"

Figure 2



Source: *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me*.

I wasn't too sure about this film when it started. As every little person knows, when you deal with documentary makers and journalists you do so at your peril. Disabled people are overwhelmingly presented poorly. They include awful stereotypes like, "they sit around all day thinking about how horrible their disabilities are," whereas, in fact, disabled people just don't think like that. We don't think about our disabilities on a daily basis, or not until some insensitive blockhead points at us and reminds us we're supposed to be this thing called disabled.

The question of disclosure is a persistent topic that has ramifications in terms of trust, authenticity, and the suspicion of non-users of SL. Davis asks if this makes for deception or freedom. Boellstorff argues that roleplaying in SL is not that different than in RL. As a member of a small town growing up, he understands the attraction of anonymity in big cities, "to have some control over what they would reveal to people, and that was never necessarily seen as deception. It was more about having control over what you reveal and when." Davis and Boellstorff don't deny that there is a subculture of people who intentionally deceive, but they suggest that roleplaying in SL is not deception but rather performative self-discovery and alternative ways of being.

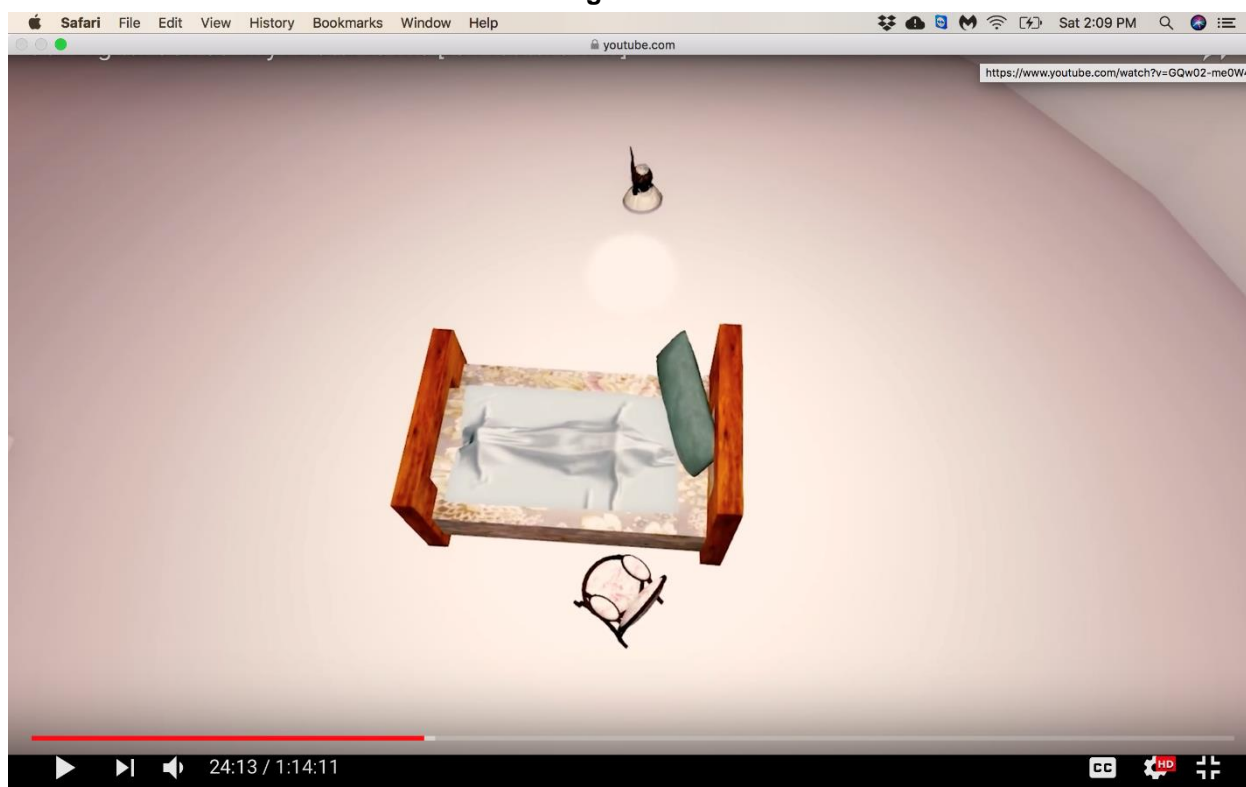
Kath McGill is a 57-year-old who had cancer twice. A series of medications caused “a cascading failure of some of my internal organs.” Kath inhabits a tiny black leopard cub wearing a bustier, pillbox hat, and pearl necklace (see Figure 3). Her interactive, immersive builds demonstrate the side effects of the long list of prescription drugs. Her most personal build was for her mother who died after living with untenable pain (see figure 4). “There are some people who are in such tremendous pain that death is the only answer. And I don’t judge people who have made that decision.” Bodily pain, impairment, and particularly the right to die, have been passionately debated among the disability community. Julie Maybee (2017) has been vocal about the subject of embodiment, which she describes as trying to broker “a compromise between the view that takes embodiment seriously and one that overstates the role of the social” (p. 297). The political/social model was given priority over impairment since the distinction between the two was made by Michael Oliver (1990). Feminist scholars such as Maybee have renegotiated this binary position. Kath’s immersive constructions about the physical effects of medication viscerally put the biological body back into disability discourse.

**Figure 3**



Source: *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me*.

Figure 4



Source: *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me*.

Later, Shyla and Drax are on their way to Chicago, Shyla is driving and stuck in traffic. She decides to turn around, which she takes in stride, and which also makes her self-reflective about her chronic, degenerative and progressive illness.

It's a grief that never really goes away.... My situation continues to get worse, so what I'm able to do today, a year from now I won't be able to do, and I will be grieving about the the things I'm no longer able to do.

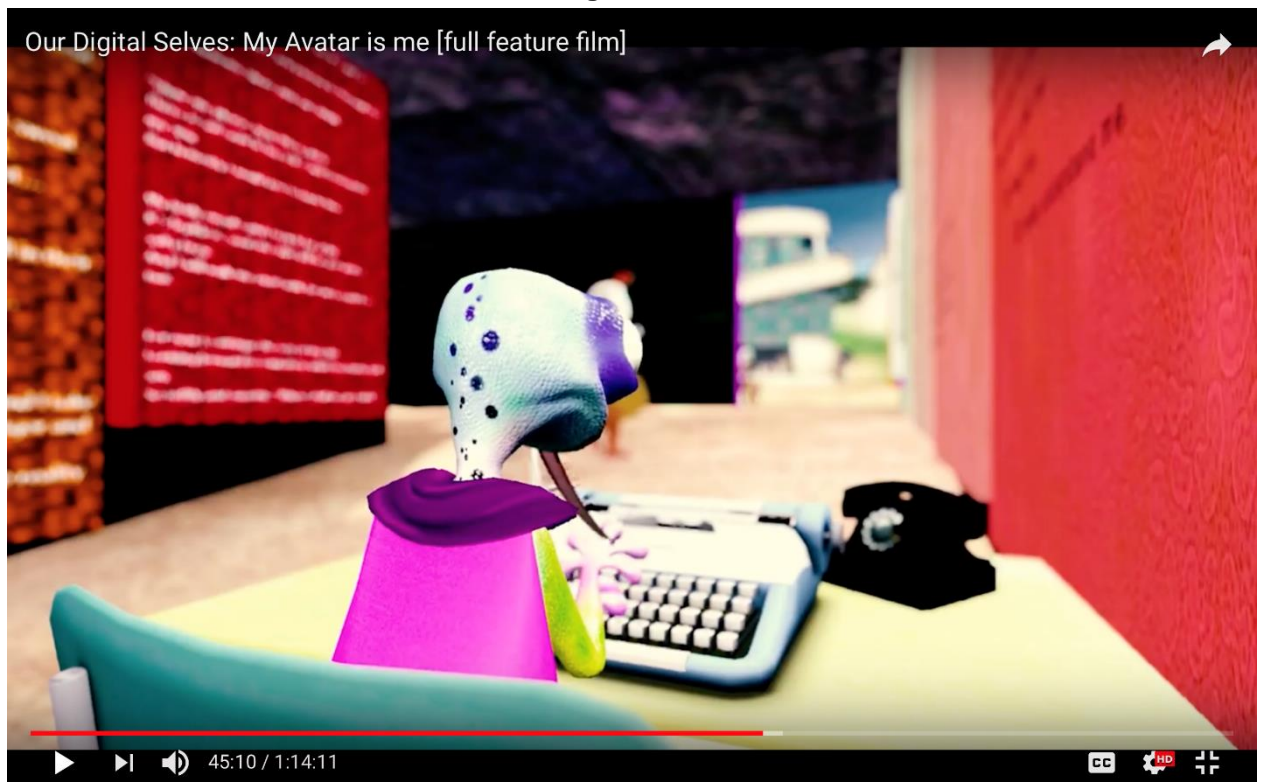
Back at home, Shyla describes the custom-made chair she sits in, a "behemoth" that allows her to be in the least pain. She spent years finding acceptance and learning to love herself again. "Like, how crazy is that? My spirit is not my body.... The thing is, I'm not broken and it's this ableism of the world that thinks I am. You don't have to fix me." Shyla internalized the notion of "fixing" and "normalizing" that is consciously and unconsciously institutionalized in education and all aspects of society. Her avatar, Super Gecko, is an expression of resistance to society's abelist systems. Super Gecko does not have magical powers typical of a super hero. "I think the power the Gecko has is transformation, that's what the Gecko is."



It's not a bad thing to cry  
It's not a bad thing to have pain  
It's not bad to be sad, or bad, or crazily joyful

For Shyla, life in SL is a mental and emotional world. She resists the notion that what she does outside of SL is real life. She wrote a poem, which she performed in SL, for her former therapist who was concerned that her time spent in the virtual world was an escape from real life (see Figure 5).

Figure 5



Source: *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me*.

So what do I do? I lay here typing words  
And changing this bastardized world  
That thinks that loving is hoarding  
Sucking the life out of everything  
That's weak  
Go for it world  
You've got a Super Gecko to deal with  
I'm cute, but I'm punchy  
I have a long tongue  
A gargantuan bite  
Don't laugh dude  
You think this is a game?

Throughout *Our Digital Selves*, Boestorff argues that SL isn't a game by applying his theory of inplacement. A soccer stadium isn't a game; the game exists

within a soccer stadium. But the game can also change. A rock concert might be held in a stadium. “SL is like the soccer stadium, it’s not the game itself.”

## Conclusion

The dichotomy between virtual and actual (or off-line) worlds are vigorously rejected by the researchers and filmmaker of *Our Digital Selves*. The importance of this argument has been persistently expressed by the avatars in the film.<sup>9</sup> The rejection of their online identities as *real* is experienced as equivalent to their off-line disabled identities defined as passive, dependent or tragic by some technologies, institutional policies, and services. Their online identities are forms of resistance to such reductive real-life identities. From this perspective, their avatars are authentic ways of challenging socially approved norms of able-bodiedness in favor of a disability rights model. Their choices of avatars also reject notions that disabled people escape into SL for social normative acceptance. Rather than choosing cosmetically beautiful bodies, Shyla Super Gecko, Daisy Gator, and Kath McGill’s tiny leopard disrupt such theories. The avatars are therefore chosen not to obscure, but to reveal significant discourses about disability.

Returning to the question of relevance that SL has for an art educator and, specifically, an art educator in disability studies, I suggest that there is much fertile ground in the several disability communities in SL. *Our Digital Selves* has done a service in affirming the credibility of disabled individuals who use SL to reignite their professional careers as artists, or to reinvent themselves as virtual builders and creators. The film has also made comprehensible the distinction between art as therapy and art as necessary as part of one’s disabled identity.

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<sup>9</sup> The avatars in this paper do not represent all the protagonists in the film. It was beyond the limit of the paper, unfortunately, to include them all.



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### **Alice Wexler**

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